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What am I doing and why? Philosophy to practice - personal observations about coaching rugby

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Abstract

This paper is a reflective account about a personal approach to coaching rugby by the first author, Stuart Wilkinson. His ongoing academic research in 2010 has prompted a fresh consideration of his coaching style which is shared interactively with his players and staff in the world of professional rugby league. This has brought about some deeper questioning of the reasons behind his approach to coaching which has led to a formulation of his coaching philosophy. His coaching philosophy; ‘a caring guide to athlete self-discovery and self-improvement’ may be regarded as a summative statement of his beliefs and values at this moment in time, to coach others in order that they might play the game well. The paper is written largely in first person, a trait of its reflective nature and incorporates some data from an interview with a player. The paper concludes that if players are equipped with the confidence and knowledge to question their own actions they may be able to self-correct their errors on the field of play and see more options to act independently instead of relying upon directives from the coach at the sideline.

Introduction

My understanding of being an athlete-centred coach means to be leading players towards independence based upon sound reasoning about the game-play situation (Mageau and Vallerand, 2003). One possible criticism of this plan is that if I succeed, I may be doing myself out of a job. This could be a short-sighted view of traditional coaching when in fact the nature of the coaching task has altered for positive reasons and thus requires long term nurturing through a different style of coaching. However, encouraging others to think for themselves is always a challenging task particularly when there is a qualified coach who may ostensibly be there to do the thinking for them. Therefore, my role as coach will always be a busy one. The consequences of having players who are over-reliant upon external directions from the coach may be stilted play, low morale in players from their constant search for approval and ultimately, confusion in accountability; praise and blame, when it comes to games lost or won. After some careful consideration; reading and reflecting upon my experience, I have decided that my coaching philosophy may be summed up as being ‘a caring guide to athlete self-discovery and

self-improvement'. A visiting researcher to the rugby club during 2009/10 came to observe and study my coaching behaviour and commented:

A caring guide to self-fulfilment and self-discovery is not a name and number on the back of Stuart Wilkinson's jacket, nor is it on a sign above his office door. The small sentence of powerful meaning is etched inside him and if one is to fully analyse his philosophy then there is a need to strategically excavate his reasons why and possibly instil some of the values into our own coaching.

The researcher went on to conclude that he had witnessed my philosophy towards my professional life through my interaction with others and that simply documenting and categorising my behaviours for all to read may provide only a limited view of my approach. A coaching philosophy must be felt, tasted, heard and seen first-hand. Perhaps only then may the observer feel the power of exchange between me and a player.

The visiting researcher's comments challenged and focused my own thinking about the difficulties of bringing my philosophy to life in text. I tend to agree that coaching philosophies are generally tacit and remain an unarticulated part of practice. That is, that what we say are our philosophies (what we claim we do) and what we actually do in practice may be two different things. Therefore, investigating my tacit belief structure and "role frame" (Schon, 1983:270); which is one understanding of how people interpret the world, might be helpful in more accurately establishing my coaching philosophy. For example, the visiting researcher asked me:

Researcher's question: Can you describe a situation in which you experimented with your style of interaction.

My Response: The questions I asked the key players slowed down the activity. Being asked 'what does this situation and field positions tell you to do?' was a big change for the players; they kept asking me, 'what do you want me to do here?' They took a few attempts during the opposed game to get it right, where I supported them with further questions, prompts and probes until they had the confidence to make the decision that suited them.

It's not what I do, but the way I do it

My coaching philosophy centres on the value of the inter-personal exchange. I hope to coach for transformation rather than just providing information, offering realistic challenges with high levels of support. My coaching relationship is a reflective and explorative one and I like solutions that emerge from an experiential focussed partnership. It is based on inclusion with a positive regard for my player. This learning journey we embark upon aims to increase the player's self awareness, their inner confidence and their optimum performance that leads ultimately to a

successful and self-reliant player. Furthermore, by employing and communicating to players and support staff the ideas behind my coaching techniques and reflective models of thinking, I hope to empower the players to take ownership of their training and game endeavours. Players are encouraged to hold themselves accountable for their learning and subsequent choice of actions or behaviours while in return, I attempt to create an environment that is open and inclusive to all personalities and individual learning styles. I have found some players are quick to experiment with new ideas or new approaches to familiar game scenarios, for example where repeated errors may be occurring. Others might choose to explore an uncomfortable or challenging situation for longer, in an attempt to understand the deeper layers of what was going on for them, for example, in a situation where they may have been injured in the past. The net result is engagement; a sustained sense of learning that benefits both the individual and the team. I've always found these episodes to be a rich source of information which I now include when formulating the players training plans.

By following this strategy, players often say to me that they feel they are growing as leaders, that they're getting better results in their rugby and they're happier in their studies, work and at home. Some have become increasingly self-reflective between games and training sessions and some have reflected on issues affecting them much further away from the rugby field. They come prepared for our times together, by starting to formulate conversations that lead to plans and interventions. They begin to notice the difference about feeling more empowered in their lives. From these experiences of guiding others at my club and my previous experience of being coached in various settings as a player, I have developed a strong belief about how I want my coaching 'to look' to those who may receive it. That is, to enable my players to experience 'a caring guide to athlete self-discovery and self-improvement' within their environment for being a rugby player.

The following passage is from a conversation I had with a player which indicates how I encouraged them to take responsibility for their learning and subsequent practice design:

Coach: Yeah it's been good so far but there are a few things that we could do better. Can you describe a moment or instance from coaching that is significant for you, when you think "I see it now, I can visually understand what's happening to me". I am interested to learn if you can sense what's happening to you and what understanding leave with from the session. From whether our conversation lasts milliseconds, or whether it's an in depth conversation, is there anything particularly memorable, what's the first thing that comes into your mind?

Player: Yes, The first thing that comes to mind is the problem I had nominating and re-nominating when a team had numbers on us in a match, and even though we should have pushed better from the inside, the problem could have been fixed by the winger putting himself in a better position to cover a kick, a short ball and a scoop ball, do you remember that?

That sticks out in my mind, every time I play, every time I train, I always try to remember where to put myself ... where the best place for me be is at that moment. And I've conceded a lot less tries than I used to and it only took about ten minutes didn't it?

Coach: Oh yes, I remember, can you recall how I coached this?

Player: In the office, you showed me on that piece of paper... you showed me where to stand and I left understanding it and I've taken it onto the field, on the training field, we practiced it and it's worked in games.

Coach: There are two things I'm going to ask you to go a little deeper on here, in terms of where you stood, what is your main attribute in where you stood, in what I asked you to do, what could you do standing where I asked you to stand that you could not do before?

Player: I could see more than one outcome, more than one possibility that they could throw at me, where I was standing before, I could only see one possibility, a pass to the centre say, the short ball, but where you told me to stand, I could see more possibilities, you know the kick, whether it was the fourth or fifth tackle.

The main point emerging from this passage is not that the coach drew a diagram on a piece of paper for the player to stand elsewhere for a better vantage point during a match. Rather that resulting from this interaction the player seemed to work out for himself where the best position might be and thereafter, they could adapt the knowledge to new situations, all the time being reinforced with slightly more success than before – or at least a different outcome to respond to. The decision to alter position was the player's and any subsequent experimentation with his position which may have afforded new vantages or game play opportunities would have been his decision also. What I think I coached was a sense of ownership and responsibility for the new opportunities in play that were felt by the player brought about by his independent decision making.

Nash, *et al* (2008:539) claimed that, “a philosophy underpins all aspects of coaching and that by creating a formal philosophy, coaches may improve their coaching effectiveness”. The means by which coaches may establish this may be based upon their experience, knowledge, values, opinions and beliefs in their sport and to some degree in their life. If this is the case then my own philosophy isn't based solely on the sporting environment which I inhabit or the technical and tactical models of my sport alone. These are tangible and I see them as a set of beliefs for game

preparation and tactical strategies. However, they do constitute elements of my concept for performance achievement – playing the game well in a technical sense. I see my philosophy as being a more comprehensive set of values about my behaviour and practice that may overlap between my sport performance models and some of my life's general values: 'a caring guide to athlete self-discovery and self-improvement'. The following quote struck a chord with me emphasizing the nature of my philosophy,

'Coach', he whispered. His voice shook just a trifle. 'I found it, coach, the thing you wanted me to learn for myself' (Scholz, 1991:27).

When I first saw this quote in the early 1990s I thought, wow...this is it! They were just like me, they do want to become independent and self-reliant. That was twenty years ago and I'm still developing my methods of empowering my players through questioning, guided discovery and latterly, using the games-sense approach espoused by Hadfield (1994) in his Query Theory.

Games and questioning – a reflection of me and of my philosophy

I believe in building character amongst a group of players, so that they take responsibility for their preparation and performance and this is part of the foundation for a player-centred approach. Therefore every member of the team should have the ability to become a leader when the time is appropriate, to communicate what he is seeing during a game and understand where to go and how to move. Consequently, all my games have a purpose on a journey of understanding rugby behaviour; to help the players' see it, identify with it, call it and react to it.

I've always believed in traditional values such as honesty, trust, fairness and standing up for what is right and I work hard with the players so they can identify and develop values in a manner that are meaningful to them. This goes a long way to help me with my holistic method of developing players as people. I've always helped players to develop career goals as this seems critical in developing *thinking people* who are able to empower themselves, have some focus in their life outside of rugby. I've always supported their endeavours to study, to work or help re-connect with their community by volunteering as coaches or helpers with junior teams and more recently an environmental project in the local community. Basically, I encourage players to think how they respond to a community and to be receptive as to how outsiders may respond to them. This helps to create an environment in which players are confident to contribute towards many tasks for their club, on and off the pitch.

I am a coach who likes to learn and believe that learning faster than others is critical, after all, the future belongs to whoever gets there first. Therefore I communicate this to my players and staff, making sure they are open to new ideas, from me or each other. Many professional rugby league players love innovation, however they are often too quick to judge the innovation by its immediate effect. Sometimes, in their eyes, if it is not a quick fix it is not a fix at all. I welcome mistakes, from both staff and players as making mistakes seems to be a valuable part of the learning process. Sometimes to make this point, I've played games with the team whereby the side with most mistakes are the winners, why? because they took risks, they were the doers. This appears to go a long way towards developing a culture of risk takers, however I am aware to ensure they are not continually making the same mistakes.

Some time ago I was given a book which outlined the Teaching Games for Understanding approach to teaching (Griffin and Butler, 2005). The authors discussed the initiative originally developed by David Bunker and Rod Thorpe in 1982. The book usefully provides an insight into the use of game-like situations in which athletes may learn about technical skills application and tactics of the actual game. The basic idea is that by playing a game, the participants will experience the need to develop certain kinds of skill and tactics as a result of playing, for them to take the game on to the next level. The method allows for the development of greater intrinsic motivation among players and permits real-time actions which may be more appropriate to the actual game for which players are being trained. This book was pointing me in what felt like the right direction for me and it was helping me to establish some ideas about what I wanted my coaching to look like. Many years later I was fortunate to meet Rod Thorpe at a lecture he was giving at Derby University. That was also an inspiring moment for me.

In my professional experience of coaching rugby, designing games that help to develop independence seems to be a valuable way of creating tactical understanding and awareness, i.e. getting players to make the right decisions in various situations. The knock-on effect being that it helps players to identify with what it takes to make a calculated risk, in essence what a low risk, high percentage play looks like, feels and sounds like. The dynamic created from this approach has helped me to develop a questioning approach in my coaching pedagogy. Significantly, the 'how' type of questions seem to help develop a self-awareness in bodily action illustrating the importance of procedural knowledge – "knowing how", after Ryle (1949:28) and developed later by Gardner, (1983:205) with his work on bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence. In professional rugby league the coach can tell some players the same thing over and over, but unless they understand it physically, identify with it, describe it with movement, they may struggle to take it on board. In the face of this reality I started to develop a more open style of questioning that may invite the

consideration of wider possibilities in game-play situations, for example, what could have happened here? or, when that player moved what might have occurred in response? or, if A then what were the possibilities for B?

I've used this approach since I started coaching professionally and have developed it further in my current post. Using questions does help to generate new knowledge as the more experienced or confident players reveal their own tacit knowledge and beliefs. This is a rich source of energy that I try to cultivate in the team - I value my players' opinions and the fact that they may wish to share them. "Become one" I've called these moments of flashing energy, where we 'wrap' [share] our thinking and interpretation of the situation around one another. These have become fulfilling moments in my coaching that makes all the effort worthwhile. Even during matches, the smile, the nod, it is the appreciation for hours of planning for one fleeting moment where we "become one" and then the player makes his move, this makes it all worthwhile.

An empowering approach to coaching through questioning certainly seems to help the players' thinking during training and on match days, as concentration appears to remain higher throughout the whole game: 80 minutes. However, I have made many mistakes as I've developed this approach. And yes, even today it is met with a lot of scepticism from new players who have come from different experiences, under different conditions, with different coaches. The questions certainly unsettle some players as their perceptions appear to be that I don't know the answers or don't know what to do, until a player gives me a response, at which point they begin to appreciate my strategy to deal with familiar problems in a new way for them. Once we've broken through these barriers, they feel at ease and a growing confidence is evident as they start to contribute more fully to team discussion. I've always placed high value on players' perspectives and celebrate their input as this seems to encourage creative thinking. After all, it's the players who play the game, so their ideas and ways of reading the game are very important, without them there would be no game.

Conclusion

Puzzling, troubling and uncertain situations in rugby are the kind of scenarios I try to create within my coaching practice because I believe it helps the players discover 'a caring guide to athlete self-discovery and self-improvement'. Like me they need to do certain kinds of work, in our sporting roles we must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially may make no sense. The type and style of questions I ask myself and the players helps to discover some possible answers and leads us to

the future, critically informed about our past and optimistically feeling prepared for a new challenge.

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JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote

1. Authors Reflective Comment: At the time of writing Stuart was in the second year of his Post Graduate Diploma in Elite Coaching Practice and UKCC Level 4 qualification at UCLAN. As a mature student and over 20 years' experience as a professional coach he gained a great deal from this research task and valued the opportunity to develop it into a mentored journal article. Formulating my ideas for this article has given me so much confidence in my coaching practice and discussions around specific areas of the coaching process.
2. Author Profile: Stuart graduated with a First Class Honours degree from Leeds Met Carnegie before studying at UCLAN and worked at Leeds Rhinos, Wigan Warriors and Widnes Vikings as a full time coach, alongside this he has coached England Academy, and is currently the Elite Coach Mentor for the French Rugby League. His academic confidence boosted, he is now considering returning to Higher Education to follow a Masters Programme and ultimately a PhD.
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